

**Mayor Alex Penelas
Universal Pre-K Conference
Disney World's Contemporary Resort, Orlando, FL
Thursday, December 4, 2003**

- Good morning -- again -- everybody.
- A little over a year ago, I convened the first Universal Pre-Kindergarten Conference -- which was attended by most of the people in this room.
- We met last year just two weeks after the election to begin the process of converting the voters' mandate into a Pre-K reality.
- Out of that meeting came the first recommendations that were sent to the UPK Advisory Council. A few short weeks ago that process was completed by the Florida Board of Education.
- So, today, we meet again with a cross section of people -- from our own State and various parts of the Country -- who care about children.
- I am proud of the work all of you do for our children as I am proud of my community's great devotion to children: Children's Summit ... Year of the Child ... Head Start ... Subsidized Childcare ... Children's Trust.
- And, of course, I am particularly thankful for all the inspired contributions by my co-host, David Lawrence.
- As many of you know, I'm dedicated to this issue because I've seen firsthand the benefits of early education.
- My own children, William and Christopher are of school age, and their Pre-K experience was a positive turning point in their young lives -- and I became convinced that every child in the State should have the same opportunity. But, William and Christopher were offered that golden opportunity because Lillie and I could afford to pay.
- Knowing that many children were not offered the same opportunity as my children because their parents could not afford it was very disturbing.
- A quality early education should not depend upon the parents' ability to pay.
- That's why I fought for this Constitutional Amendment -- and as difficult as it was to achieve -- it was only the beginning of an arduous task.

- Here in this room are the nation's most respected and esteemed leaders in education ... childcare ... government ... business ... faith-based organizations ... organized labor ... and the media.
- We meet to craft what -- we hope -- will be the final version of this important initiative.
- As we are overwhelmingly aware, the process to convert a Constitutional amendment into law is complex and arduous.
- Particularly when it is essential that the law respect the letter ... the spirit ... and the intent of the amendment ... and the will of the millions of Florida citizens who supported it.
- We are grateful to Lt. Governor Jennings—who chaired the UPK Advisory Council -- for showing us the blueprint of how it is done.
- What we do here today, ladies and gentlemen, is continue the fight to carry out the people's mandate -- that by 2005, not one four-year-old child in this State will be denied a high quality Pre-Kindergarten education.
- Ultimately that can only be done by persuading the Legislature to move quickly to implement this law.
- Our agenda is to work out the details and make sure that legislation meets all essential criteria – and timelines.
- There is much to be done and many questions still to be answered.
 - For example, should the core program be six hours – or four hours – each day?
 - How many hours a day of wrap-around services – if any – should be added to the core curriculum?
 - To ensure parental choice, how do we form a true public/private partnership – including partnership with faith-based organizations – to provide quality early education?
 - What should be the minimum academic qualifications for lead teachers? For resource teachers? Nothing less for elite teacher than a CDA and over the next eight years a BA certified teacher in early education.

- Should all teachers have a minimum of a national Child Development Associate certificate?
 - What is the proper teacher-to-child ratio? We ought to insist on the 1 to 10 ratio and nothing less.
 - What can we do to make sure that parents are fully involved in the education of their children?
 - What is the appropriate system of career ladder opportunities?
 - Must we have researched based curricula that properly followed will ensure readiness for all children?
 - How do we reconcile differing UPK Advisory Council findings and the recommendations of the Board of Education– and still maintain respectful consideration of all points of view.
 - And how do we measure success, perhaps we follow the lead of my home community and implement social, emotional and cognitive assessments at the end of the year so we can share with parents, children's progress?
- The answer to these questions – and many more -- will take all of our energies -- and all of our wisdom – and all of our compassion -- to thwart the possibility that Universal Pre-Kindergarten might be implemented on the cheap.
 - I am sure we are all horrified at the thought that this program for which we have all worked so hard might be reduced to an elaborate non educational childcare program – rather than an opportunity for true high quality education.
 - I don't have the answers to all these questions right now. I've come here with an open mind.
 - But, ladies and gentlemen, we have in this room perhaps the finest minds and the most devoted men and women that you will find anywhere. You do have the answers because you are in the trenches everyday.
 - It would be unusual – if not unfeasible – if we didn't have many opinions and differences in educational philosophy -- as well as diversity in direction, timing and implementation.

- Let me make it clear that we are not here to reinvent wheels -- or to disregard respected ideas. We are here to build on these ideas, to polish them, to shape them and to add to them. And to find new avenues to success.
- There are few problems in this world that cannot be solved by people of good will -- working together -- caring together -- dreaming together. But, true success will only be achieved if there is real spirit of coherence.
- This is a crucial day in the mission to establish Universal Pre-Kindergarten as the Law of the State.
- After Phil Handy and Amy Wilkins share with us their thoughts during lunch, we will break into workshop sessions to hone the finite details of our legislative strategies.
- When we assemble later, it is my hope that we will have a set of strategies that will make educational history.
- There is no reason why ...
 - In this wonderful State where we revel in the bounties of nature;
 - In this century when all the knowledge in the world is at our fingertips;
 - In this nation -- where opportunity is our birthright
- ... there should be one four-year-old child who does not have full access to quality early education.
- That is our charge, ladies and gentlemen -- not because it is easy -- but because it is hard -- and because it is so important.

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